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**SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke**

Three unlined writing tablets and a box of cheap white envelopes, and a few odds and ends like chocolate flavored laxatives and menthol cough drops are all the supplies left from the "Wet Mexican" era. Emergency foodstuffs to feed the foot-weary, job hunter rust in the kitchen cupboard; steel cots and old bedding ruin in the rafters of the barn.

On peak years of the migration, the Boss kept 20 to 30 men working, grubbing cactus and building fence, and nearly every week fed that many extras looking for work. Most of the first waves were from Northern Mexico. Over the period of two decades, the only theft from all this human traffic was part of the peach crop in the back yard.

On a Sunday, the following note was left on the back porch written in Spanish: "Mister, we are six men from Monclova. We took your fruits because of hunger. I will pay you back on the way to Mexico. Pedro."

Pedro was a year passing back by the ranch. On his return he brought a gift and a 100-peso note, worth over \$6 in American currency in those days.

The wets learned a lot of new things, however, working on the ranches. Many a gate post probably still has marks from their driving lessons, and no doubt there are stacks of power lawn tools that died from bouncing off faucets and

exposed water pipes. But they served an invaluable and irreplaceable role as scapegoats from every mishap on the ranches, from gate latches failing to water cups falling over in the tanks.

Job limitations barred them from working in the savings and loan industries and big brokerage houses. I personally don't think the boys I knew would have made much of a hand at kiting checks, or churning accounts. Citizenship laws barred them from service in public offices. As overqualified as they were to draw advances, they'd have fit in well in Congress.

Sunday before last Christmas, two drain lines stopped up at the ranch house. Company was coming Monday evening. The drains served the two bathrooms in the house. The closest plumbing company costs a 120-mile round trip charge.

At 3 p.m. I attacked, vowing to uproot or unstop those two 4-inch pipes if it took a box of dynamite or the flames from a propane torch. Somewhere, down on my knees, poking a cable against an impassable blockage, I humbly asked the Heavenly Father why he had created Wet Mexicans and then allowed Congress to take them away from us.

I keep watching for a published scorecard on the benefits of the fateful law. I miss having them around. The last I heard of Pedro was that he had a green permit card. He sure left our outfit with an excellent credit rating.